

Citizens Advice proposals for the  
**Home Office (HO) and  
the Government Equalities  
Office (GEO)**

Using the Spending Review to make  
life simpler and fairer for people

# Introduction

Whether in our one-to-one advice work, or in the analysis of our client evidence at a national level, Citizens Advice consistently generates sound solutions to the problems that people encounter day in, day out.

Our policy proposals often come down to making life simpler and fairer for people who rely on public services, achieving more for less, and ensuring that help goes to those most in need of it. The Government's Spending Review presents a rare opportunity to achieve these outcomes on a broad scale.

In its draft Structural Reform Plan, HO includes in its priorities the need 'to protect people's freedoms and civil liberties' and 'to enable the police and local communities to tackle crime'. Citizens Advice particularly welcomes the following specific objectives:

- To improve the recording of hate crime.
- To develop a cross-government strategy on preventing violence against women.

Informed by our unique understanding of the difficulties that people are facing, which coincide with HO priorities, this submission sets out:

- the issues we think the Spending Review should focus on addressing
- the ways in which the Citizens Advice service – with its extensive network of bureaux, high levels of public trust, and professional volunteer workforce – could support HO to deliver solutions to these issues.

## **In summary, our submission reveals the key issues as being:**

- discrimination is going unchallenged, causing stress and costing the economy
- existing dispute resolution systems are insufficient
- gender violence services are patchy, inconsistent and inadequate
- hate crime often goes unrecorded and unaddressed.

## Support for service delivery

We welcome the Spending Review's consideration of whether more government activities could be delivered by the voluntary sector – in order to simultaneously improve service levels and achieve savings. This submission sets out a series of practical and innovative ways in which we could potentially support government in the delivery of solutions. In short, Citizens Advice could:

- establish an independent hate crime reporting and awareness raising service
- offer an early intervention dispute resolution service
- provide a health setting-based advice service.

## Why Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice Bureaux are local charities working with, and trusted by, some of the most vulnerable people in society. They:

- provide free, confidential and impartial advice from over 3,500 community locations
- give clients, and others like them, a voice by spotting failures in the system and responding with policy proposals.

Citizens Advice Bureaux are organised to deliver value for money. They:

- mobilise 21,500 volunteers, saving a market rate of £106 million and creating vibrant communities
- develop skills and encourage progression – 40 per cent of volunteers who leave go into paid employment or higher education
- boost local economies by helping people to avoid debt, manage it, and maximise their incomes
- reduce the strain on local authority, health and legal services.

Citizens Advice Bureaux deliver impressive results. During 2009/10 they:

- advised 2.1 million people on 7.1 million problems
- enabled 12.7 million queries to be researched independently on [Adviceguide.org.uk](http://Adviceguide.org.uk)
- improved the situation of 6.4 million people by influencing policy.

# The problems

## 1 Discrimination is going unchallenged, causing stress and costing the economy

Last year Citizens Advice Bureaux helped clients deal with over 28,000 discrimination problems, an increase of 22 per cent in the last two years. Despite extensive legislation, enhanced by the Equality Act 2010, research shows that many people do not challenge the discrimination they experience. Reasons include a lack of knowledge about what action – formal or informal – an individual can take, and fear of job loss.<sup>1</sup> The research highlights a need for increased support to individuals, yet discrimination remains in the top three problems that people cannot get help with.<sup>2</sup>

The cumulative impact of all forms of discrimination on the economy is very significant:

- Racial discrimination at work doubles the risk of developing common mental health disorders and can undermine occupational functioning. Common mental health disorders are thought to account for a third of working days lost to ill health, with the overall annual cost of all common mental disorders in the UK estimated to exceed £6 billion.<sup>3</sup>
- Age discrimination alone costs the UK economy over £31 billion a year.<sup>4</sup>

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1 *Perceptions of discrimination in employment*, Government Equalities Office, 2009

2 *Causes of Action*, Legal Services Research Centre, 2007

3 *Ethnic minority psychiatric illness rates in the community* commissioned by the Department of Health, 2005

4 *Ageism: Too Costly to Ignore*, Employers' Age Forum, 2001

## 2 Existing dispute resolution systems are unsatisfactory

It is well recognised that (while vital as a last resort) formal, court-based adjudication of employment related discrimination problems is a largely unsatisfactory route to resolution. It is expensive – prohibitively so for some – costing at least £9,000 for employers and £2,500 for employees. Rates of success are generally low, and even then the injured party will often receive only partial financial compensation. It can also have negative consequences for the claimant; 43 per cent of discrimination claimants in employment tribunals report experiencing stress and depression as a direct result of making the claim. Figures for non-employment claims are not readily available but they could be at least as high.

Mediation is an important option, but is not suitable in many cases of discrimination, particularly where sexual or other forms of harassment have been involved. Not least because mediation assumes that the victim is in some way responsible or capable of altering the offender's behaviour. There is also a risk to the victim's safety in terms of potential reprisals. In any event, mediation may fail since the victim is unlikely to disclose their true feelings so publicly.<sup>5</sup> A wider choice of dispute resolution systems is needed.

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<sup>5</sup> Women's Aid, [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

### **3 Gender violence services are patchy, inconsistent and inadequate**

In 2009/10 the Citizens Advice service dealt with over 20,000 gender violence enquiries, an increase of 12 per cent on the previous year. Partly in response to this growth, some 30 bureaux now provide specialist domestic abuse services.

It is well accepted that violence against women affects one in four, and has a wide range of negative impacts on the children who witness it, including poor educational outcomes and reduced life chances. The estimated cost of domestic violence to society is £23 billion per annum, including £3.1 billion to the state.<sup>6</sup>

Intervening early to prevent gender violence can protect those experiencing it from harm and reduce the incidence of mental ill health, homelessness and family breakdown.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the introduction of sexual assault referral centres, multi-agency risk assessment panels and independent advocates for victims, the provision of gender violence services is patchy, inconsistent and inadequate in too many areas.

### **4 Hate crime too often goes unrecorded and unaddressed**

There is increasing awareness that hate crime blights – and tragically sometimes takes – the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in society. Hate crime figures vary by community but, for example, one in eight lesbian, gay and bisexual people are subject to hate incidents, yet seven in ten victims report the incident to no one.

Many people do not recognise what is happening to them as hate and therefore do not seek help, let alone actually put the incident on record. Citizens Advice evidence shows that even when people do seek help, from the police and housing authorities for example, they can find that their problems are not taken as seriously as they should be. Without independent advice and support it can be hard to get authorities to act.

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<sup>6</sup> Walby, 2004

<sup>7</sup> *Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls: A Strategy*, HM Government, 2009

# The roles Citizens Advice could play in delivering solutions

## There is a clear need for:

- improved understanding of what is and is not acceptable behaviour in our society
- greater knowledge of what action can be taken against perpetrators of unacceptable behaviour
- easier access to support
- earlier intervention
- more appropriate resolution systems.

## The Citizens Advice service is ideally placed to work with HO to deliver solutions which would, at the same time, reduce bureaucracy and achieve more for less.

As an organisation, we are geared up to develop the most appropriate services, target them effectively and deliver them efficiently. In fact working to our 2014 strategic plan will see us:

- greatly improving access to advice by establishing and developing our national Adviceline telephone service
- equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to prevent problems occurring
- encouraging clients to adopt digital technology by offering use of the internet and accessing web-based public services on their behalf
- recruiting and training even more volunteers, promoting community involvement and helping people back into paid work.

Specifically, the Citizens Advice service could assist HO to address the problems outlined in this submission and achieve substantial savings by:

- 1.** Establishing an independent hate crime reporting and awareness raising service.

In addition, Citizens Advice proposals to other government departments could support the Government Equalities Office in achieving cross-departmental objectives – and savings – relating to discrimination, hate crime, gender violence and the effective implementation of the Equality Act, by:

- 2.** Offering an early intervention dispute resolution service (BIS).
- 3.** Providing a health setting-based advice service (DOH).

## 1 Establishing an independent hate crime reporting and awareness raising service

Research and Citizens Advice client evidence show that victims do not report hate crimes because: they do not think the incident is serious enough to report; they do not know that the incident perpetrated against them was an offence; or they think the police would not treat the incident seriously.

Citizens Advice Bureaux serve people from all communities experiencing hate crime incidents, many of whom seek advice for knock-on problems caused by hate – for example with housing – rather than for the hate incidents themselves. Bureaux are therefore well placed to support people to identify hate and take action. In fact over 120 bureaux are already hate crime reporting centres or members of multi-agency initiatives.

The service would be designed to allow hate crimes to be reported online, by telephone and face-to-face; to empower and support the individual where possible to address the consequences of the incident themselves; and to take action on their behalf where necessary.

It would work in partnership with other agencies, and would play a proactive role within local communities to raise awareness of the existence and impact of hate crime on both the individual and the community.

Together with our proposal for advice in health settings (see below), it could lead to a step-change in reporting levels and to savings, especially to the health budget.

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## **2 Offering an early intervention dispute resolution service (BIS)**

The early intervention dispute resolution service would be designed to avoid reliance on the Employment Tribunal service and would be delivered through the most effective channel, taking all of the circumstances into account.

Citizens Advice would provide information and where appropriate mediate between the employer and employee, with a view to achieving the best possible outcome for all parties.

It is anticipated that the service would play a key role in dealing with discrimination related issues.

## **3 Providing a health setting-based advice service (DOH)**

If left unaddressed, problems relating to issues such as debt, employment, housing, discrimination, hate and gender violence can result in mental and physical symptoms. In turn, these can lead to long-term deterioration of health, which has a significant impact on the economy.

Systematically situating advice services in GP practices and other health settings would allow for intervention at the very earliest stages of a problem affecting an individual's health. Access to online information could be provided, as well as hard copy materials, as a prelude to face-to-face advice.

Individuals would be referred to the service from Adviceline, by GPs, by health professionals and by other 'problem spotters' engaged in health related work.

In addition to providing advice, the service would identify trends and links between practical problems, health and wellbeing, enabling future health plans to be more fully informed.

Volunteering opportunities within the Citizens Advice service or partner agencies would also be available, helping people to integrate into their chosen communities and take part in local social action.

## Contact us

To discuss the contents of this submission,  
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